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The National Women's Health Information Center

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Frequently Asked Questions about Emergency Contraception

What is emergency contraception (or emergency birth control)?

Emergency contraception, or emergency birth control, is used to keep a woman from getting pregnant when she has had unprotected vaginal intercourse. “Unprotected” can mean that no method of birth control was used. It can also mean that a birth control method was used but did not work – like a condom breaking. Other things can happen as well that put a woman at risk for getting pregnant. A woman may have forgotten to take her birth control pills. She may have been abused or forced to have sex when she did not want to. Emergency contraception should never be used as a regular method of birth control. There are effective methods of birth control that women can use on a regular basis to prevent pregnancy.

How does emergency contraception work?

Emergency contraception keeps a woman from getting pregnant by stopping:

- *ovulation*, or stopping the ovaries from releasing eggs that can be fertilized;
- *fertilization*, or stopping the egg from being fertilized by the sperm;
- *implantation*, or stopping a fertilized egg from attaching itself to the wall of the uterus.

If you are already pregnant, emergency contraception will NOT work. If you have an *ectopic pregnancy*, where the pregnancy develops outside of the uterus, it will also not work. This can be a serious condition that can be fatal. Signs of ectopic pregnancy include extreme pain on one or both sides of the lower abdomen, spotting blood, and feeling dizzy or faint. If you think you have an ectopic pregnancy, go to an emergency room right away.

What are the types of emergency contraception? Are they the same thing as the “morning after” pill?

There are two types of emergency contraception available to women in the United States: emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) and intrauterine devices (IUDs). In most states, you need to see a health care provider to get either type of emergency contraception. The health care provider may take your medical history and do a urine pregnancy test, and will talk with you about which type of emergency contraception is best for you. You should never take ECPs that belong to another family member or friend. It is very important to first talk with a health care provider.

ECPs are sometimes wrongly called the “morning after pill.” This is wrong because ECPs are never taken as one pill, the “morning after.” They are taken in two doses, 12 hours apart. They work best if taken within 72 hours of unprotected vaginal intercourse. ECPs contain higher doses of hormones than those contained in birth control pills. ECPs can have only one hormone, progestin, or can have two hormones, estrogen and progestin. If a woman can't take estrogen or is breastfeeding, she can use progestin-only ECPs. If you need ECPs, your health care provider will prescribe the best pill for you to use.

The other type of emergency contraception is an intrauterine device (IUD). A woman can have the Copper-T IUD, which is shaped like a “T,” and placed inside her uterus (or womb) by a health care provider. This must be done within seven days after unprotected vaginal intercourse. The IUD can be taken out by a health care provider after the woman’s next period. It also can be left in place for up to 10 years if the woman decides to use it as her regular method of birth control.

I was given emergency contraception in an emergency room. What do I need to do after I take the pills?

Take the emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) exactly as the health care provider tells you. If you see another health care provider for any reason after taking any dose of ECPs, be sure to tell her or him that you have taken ECPs.

Some women have nausea and vomiting after taking ECPs. A health care provider can prescribe medication to help control the nausea. If you have severe nausea, it is important not to stop taking the pills. If you do not finish the pills, you may not prevent the pregnancy. After you have taken ECPs, you can expect that your first period may come sooner or later than normal. Your blood flow also may be different – heavier, lighter, or more spotty than normal. You **MUST** use another method of birth control if you have vaginal intercourse any time before your next period starts. Now is a good time for you to start planning for the future. Learn about birth control methods and choose one you feel comfortable with. Talking with your health care provider is a good way to start. If you do not start your period within three weeks or have any signs of pregnancy after taking ECPs, see a health care provider right away.

How effective is emergency contraception at preventing pregnancy?

Emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) that contain both estrogen and progestin are about 75% effective at keeping a woman from getting pregnant. ECPs that contain only progestin are about 89% effective. The Copper-T intrauterine device (IUD) is 99.9% effective. Timing is important to how well emergency birth control works. The sooner a woman gets emergency birth control after having unprotected vaginal intercourse, the better it works. If a woman is in the fertile part of her cycle (ovulating), or close to that time, when she uses emergency birth control, her chances of getting pregnant are greater.

My girlfriend took emergency contraceptive pills (ECPs) and they did not work. If she keeps the pregnancy, will there be something wrong with her baby?

Studies have been done with women who did not know they were pregnant and kept taking birth control pills. These studies have found no increased risk for birth defects. Your girlfriend should see a health care provider right away to talk about her options.

Is emergency contraception the same thing as the “abortion pill?”

No. Emergency contraception prevents pregnancy. It works by stopping an egg from being released from the ovary and by stopping an egg from being fertilized, or reached by sperm. Emergency contraception also stops a fertilized egg from attaching, or implanting, itself to the wall of the uterus (or womb). The so-called “abortion pills” (Mifeprex (*mifepristone*) also called RU-486) work after a woman becomes pregnant – after a fertilized egg attaches to the wall of the uterus. These pills cause the uterus to expel the egg, ending the pregnancy.

For More Information...

You can find out more about emergency contraception by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (NWHIC) (800) 994-WOMAN (9662) or the following organizations:

Food and Drug Administration

Phone Number(s): (888) 463-6332

Internet Address: <http://www.fda.gov/>

Emergency Contraception Hotline

Phone Number(s): (888) 668-2528

Internet Address: <http://ec.princeton.edu>

Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Phone Number(s): (800) 230-7526, (800) 669-0156 (To Order Materials)

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/>

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